

**#WeAreInternational**  
**Grants scheme 2022–24**  
**Pilot project**

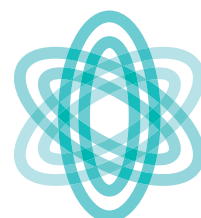
# **Beyond cultural differences:** critical intercultural orientation workshops for newly arrived students

Newcastle University

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**UK Council  
for International  
Student Affairs**

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## Acknowledgements

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UKCISA is a membership organisation that works to support international students and the institutions, students' unions and organisations who work closely with them.

The [#WeAreInternational Student Charter](#) focuses on integrating the principles of the #WeAreInternational Student Charter in higher and further education institutions in the UK, to deliver a world-class international student experience, from pre-arrival to post-graduation.



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# Contents

<b>1. Background and project aims</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Summary of outcomes</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3. Project set-up and evaluation</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4. Benefits to Newcastle University</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>5. Sector-wide benefits</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>6. Impact on international students</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>7. Impact on ‘home’ students</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>8. Impact on educators and other HE practitioners</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>9. Recommendations for UK HE institutions</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>10. References</b>	<b>11</b>

## 1. Background and project aims

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Orientation provision for international students tends to take an overly simplistic and uncritical approach aimed at ‘helping’ international students to adapt to the ‘new’ environment by teaching them about cultural differences (Selby, 2020). This perpetuates a deficit view of international students and reinforces an ‘us-them’ narrative. In response to a lacuna of critical approaches that do not position international students as the ‘cultural other’, this pilot project aimed to develop a programme of workshops emphasising reciprocal intercultural learning. Aligned with a ‘researching with international students’ approach (Mittelmeier et al., 2023), the workshops were co-created with international students and informed by evidence from the latest research on international students’ transition experiences. Aligned with the UNESCO Story Circles method (Deardorff, 2020) the objective was to support all students, whether internationally mobile or not, to develop intercultural competencies by:

1. enabling reciprocal dialogue and intercultural learning among international students and with ‘home’ students
2. empowering critical self-reflection rather than solely acquisition of factual knowledge about the host environment.

At the institutional level, this pilot project aimed to fill a gap in the current orientation provision at Newcastle University (NU), which treats international students as a separate entity from their domestic counterparts. International students are inducted as part of ‘International Welcome’, which takes place a week before ‘Induction Week’ for the general student population. While there are arguably orientation topics that are salient to students from overseas (e.g. visas and immigration), a separate induction programme for international students implies that they are a homogenous and struggling group that needs ‘help’ to adjust to the new environment.

Orientation and support for international students continue to overwhelmingly take a differentialist approach that over-emphasises cultural differences and portrays study abroad as inherently challenging and problematic. Orientation programmes, at NU and elsewhere, are often underpinned by an assumption that ‘culture shock’ is inevitable and factual knowledge about ‘British culture’ can help mitigate this. The principle underpinning this pilot project was that both ‘home’ and international students experience success and failures during their studies, and that both groups require intercultural competencies to operate effectively and confidently in an increasingly multicultural and multilingual world.

## 2. Summary of outcomes

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Over the course of this pilot project, a programme of five intercultural orientation workshops was developed, trialled and implemented. The workshops are now part of the International Welcome programme at NU and have also been offered as part of the NCL+ award, which allows students to gain recognition for extra-curricular activities. The project team produced a toolkit comprising PowerPoint slides for five workshops and a facilitator manual with detailed guidance notes.

## 3. Project set-up and evaluation

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Co-creation was at the centre of this pilot project. Much current intercultural orientation provision remains detached from international students' lived experiences and is often underpinned by popular models of 'culture shock' for which there is little empirical support (Zhao and Scharner, 2023). Therefore, a student consultant was employed, who was an international student and UKCISA #WeAreInternational ambassador.

During the materials-development phase (February to May 2023), the student consultant worked closely with the project lead, an intercultural communication scholar with more than a decade of experience in researching international students' experiences, to develop a series of intercultural prompts and activities underpinned by the UNESCO Story Circles method. After reviewing literature on intercultural competence, the project team settled on five key themes for the programme of workshops:

1. Identity
2. Cultural values and beliefs
3. Diversity
4. Personal values
5. Self-awareness.

For each theme, the team created a 90-minute workshop. For consistency, each workshop followed the same structure:

1. Ice-breaker group activity
2. Story circle
  - a. Intercultural storytelling prompt (see Table 1 for examples)
  - b. Story sharing (each group member tells a story of no more than three minutes)
  - c. Flashback round (group members reflect on each other's stories)
3. Plenary debrief.

The project team created a toolkit that included PowerPoint slides for each workshop with ice-breaker activities and story circle prompts, and a facilitator manual with detailed guidance notes.

Table 1. Examples of intercultural prompts

Intercultural prompt 1	Reflecting on all the layers and shades of your identity, think about an event that shaped an aspect of your identity. Describe the event to others in no more than three minutes.
Intercultural prompt 2	Think about a time when you were the only person with a given characteristic in the entire room. Describe the experience in no more than three minutes.

In the early stages of development, a pre-arrival virtual exchange component was planned. This was, however, not implemented, given the transition back to full in-person delivery of welcome programmes at NU following the Covid-19 pandemic. The format of the workshop materials is, however, flexible and adaptable enough to work in both in-person and virtual settings. This is reflected in the facilitator guide, and guidance notes are provided for both settings accordingly.

The workshop materials were trialled during the piloting and feedback phase (June to August 2023). In August 2023, a trial session was held with key stakeholders at NU.

**'Beyond cultural differences'**  
Critical intercultural orientation workshops

**Trial session**

**Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> August 2-4pm, Howden Room, King George VI Building**

Come and join us for a trial session to learn more about newly developed intercultural orientation workshops funded by the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA)

The session will include:

- Project background
- Demonstration of a taster activity
- Guidance for prospective workshop facilitators



Refreshments will be available

Contact: [alina.schartner@nu.ac.uk](mailto:alina.schartner@nu.ac.uk)



Image 1. Trial session advertisement

The 12 trial participants included:

- academic colleagues with leadership roles related to internationalisation (e.g., Director for Global)
- professional services colleagues with responsibilities in the student or staff support remit (e.g. Student Life team, International Office, Learning and Teaching Development Service)
- students working in the internationalisation or student representation remit (e.g. International Office interns, Language Resource Centre interns, course representatives).

The aim of the trial was twofold:

1. to pilot the workshops materials and gather feedback from key stakeholders
2. to identify prospective workshop facilitators.

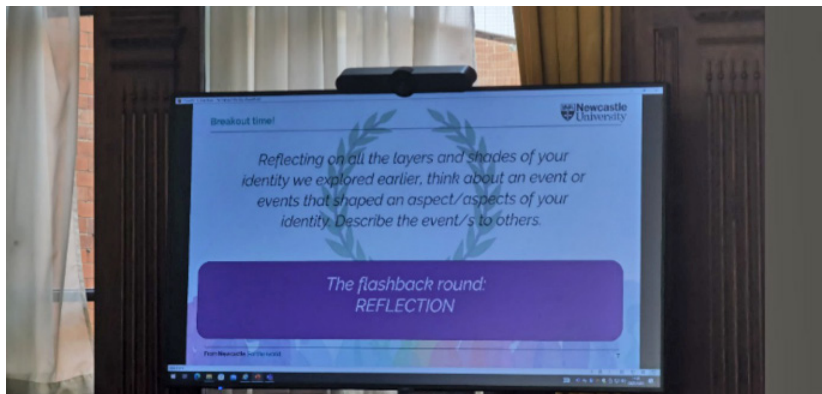


Image 2. Trial session, August 2023

Following the trial, a training session was held in August 2023 for prospective workshop facilitators in which the student consultant demonstrated a workshop activity and introduced attendees to the facilitator manual. The involvement of students as facilitators was crucial to mitigate possible power asymmetries between student participants and the project lead (an academic).

Following the trial, the workshops were delivered during the implementation phase (September to November 2023). All five workshops were integrated into the International Welcome programme at NU in September 2023, and 26 students attended. A barrier to attendance identified by the attendees were competing induction activities available on campus. Two workshops were then delivered again during the mid-semester 'Enrichment Week'.

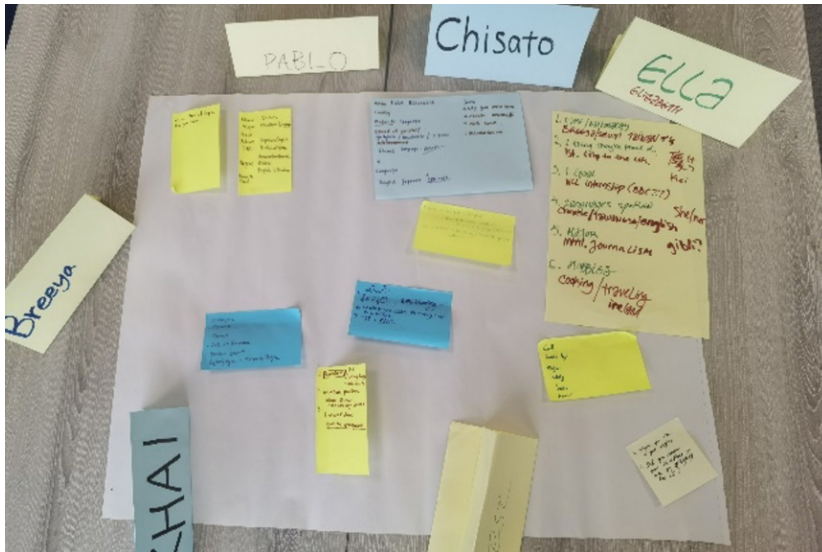


Image 3. Group activity, September 2023 workshops



Image 4. Intercultural workshop, September 2023

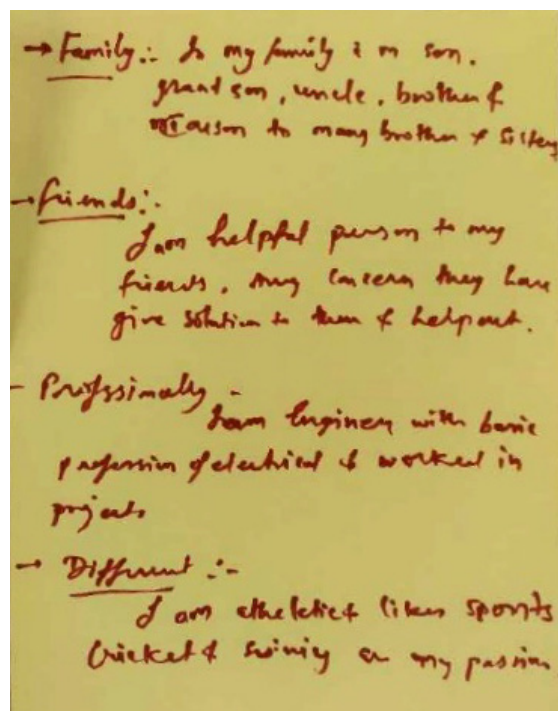


Image 5. Workshop activity notes



The workshops were well received by the attendees as indicated in an online feedback survey:

“I really like the story circle activities and enjoy telling my story and listening to others’ stories as well. I got to understand [and] see the personal values from different perspectives, and I am getting to know myself better, and I also understand how personal values and beliefs can affect my own behaviour. Love the ice-breakers and personal beliefs exploration activities!”

“I attended all the five workshops. They are wonderful. I like the facilitator, and she is always very enthusiastic. I am thinking that it would be great if can raise more students’ awareness of these

workshops. The materials are helpful, and I enjoy those hands-on activities. But it is a pity that not so many students really know the existence of these workshops.”

“I find this workshop gives us space to talk, have a discussion with my peers about the self-awareness. I like the interactive activity, creating self-awareness and identity profile. I find after this workshop I am more aware of my own culture and I have a better idea of how it may influence the way I communicate with others. Before attending this workshop, I do not have the opportunities to have this kind of deep discussion with others. I appreciate this workshop.”

During the dissemination phase (December 2023 to February 2024), various meetings were held with stakeholders in the institution, including the International Office and the Careers Service. The meetings led to the programme of workshops being part of the NCL+ award, a recognition scheme for extra-curricular activities that any NU student can partake in. The pilot project was presented at the NU Teaching and Learning Conference, and the project team was invited to speak to several university committees about the initiative (e.g. Faculty Education Committee, Global Engagement and Place committee of the NU Business School).

#### 4. Benefits to Newcastle University

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The integration of the workshops into existing university schemes (International Welcome programme, NCL+ award) will support the sustainability of the project. In addition, the workshop toolkit was disseminated to key stakeholder across the institution following the successful trial in August 2023. The workshops are included in the NU Global Education and Community initiative, supporting the ‘international student experience’ strand and its aim of ‘community building and integration’. A follow-on activity is in process to include the workshops in the Open Badge in Global and Cultural Awareness launched by the International Office. The project also responds to the aims of the NU Decolonising Agenda by offering a critical approach that does not employ a deficit view of international students.

## 5. Sector-wide benefits

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The workshops will benefit the higher education (HE) sector more widely in that they can help deconstruct the ‘home-international’ dichotomy that continues to prevail in orientation provision across much of UK HE. This pilot project offers a model that can be replicated across disciplines and scaled up across institutions as needed. The UNESCO Story Circle method offers a structured yet flexible approach to developing intercultural competencies that can be employed by HE practitioners (both academic and professional services colleagues) without prior intercultural training experience. The programme of workshops is thus easily replicated across the wider sector and can support UK universities in integrating international students with their domestic peers.

## 6. Impact on international students

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The workshops can assist international students to ‘make a home in the UK’ in line with principle 5 of the #WeAreInternational student charter by offering an opportunity for intercultural encounters with ‘home’ students and fellow international students, both prior to and shortly after their arrival in the UK. Empirical evidence suggests that targeted support in these early stages of transition is crucial.

## 7. Impact on ‘home’ students

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The workshops can enable participating ‘home’ students to partake in intercultural encounters in line with the ‘internationalisation at home’ agenda that currently has momentum in UK HE. This also responds to a social justice agenda in offering all students, whether they have the means to be internationally mobile or not, opportunities for intercultural contact.

## 8. Impact on educators and other HE practitioners

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The workshop toolkit can be widely disseminated and used/adapted by educators and other practitioners in HE (including wellbeing advisors and student integration officers). The toolkit demonstrates how the UNESCO Story Circle method can be applied in an HE setting to encourage intercultural learning.

## 9. Recommendations for UK HE institutions

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UK HE institutions seeking to establish more critical and inclusive approaches to intercultural orientation provision should:

1. Deconstruct a deficit narrative rooted in assimilationist frameworks that homogenise, stereotype and ‘other’ international students by trying to ‘fix’ them. This reproduces problematic discourses about international students and places the onus to adjust solely on them rather than their host environment. Instead of focusing on ‘otherness’, this pilot project offers a model for intercultural learning and meaningful interaction between international students and their domestic peers.
2. Encourage both ‘home’ and ‘international’ students to take part in intercultural learning. Much current orientation provision is offered to international students separately, and there is a prevailing ‘home-international’ dichotomy in UK HE that urgently needs to be deconstructed.
3. Avoid orientation provision that is informed by anecdotal evidence on international students’ adjustment issues. The workshops developed in this pilot project are underpinned by critical intercultural literature and the lived experience of international students.
4. Offer virtual pre-arrival workshops where international students can connect with ‘home’ students and with each other before travelling to the UK. This kind of pre-departure provision is not routinely offered. The workshops create opportunities for intercultural learning that go beyond topics such as ‘What to pack’ or ‘What to expect’.
5. Draw on the UNESCO Story Circles method in student and staff support provision. Current provision rarely follows a rigorously tested and research-informed method. Story circles allow for emotional connections that may not easily occur in more traditional workshop settings, and thus the workshops are likely to offer transformative encounters.

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